

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent and bipartisan federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, will participate in the meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on freedom of religion or belief in Vienna, Austria on July 17-18, 2003, in association with the U.S. delegation. This will be the fourth OSCE meeting in which the USCIRF has participated in this way. The meeting will focus on freedom of religion or belief in the contexts of permissible limitations; promoting tolerance and freedom of religion or belief; and the role of the media concerning freedom of religion or belief. Commissioners Preeta Bansal, Felice D. Gaer, and Dean Michael K. Young will join U.S. Ambassador to the OSCE Stephan M. Minikes in all aspects of the delegation's work, including offering advice to the U.S. delegation and discussing specific ways to promote tolerance, education, and respect for religious freedom in the OSCE region, including the former Soviet Union states.

Commissioners will also meet with experts monitoring violations of religious freedom in the OSCE region, including in Uzbekistan, Russia, and France, who will be offering information and recommendations regarding U.S. policy to improve these situations. The Commission will also seek bilateral meetings with representatives of Uzbekistan, Russia, France, and elsewhere. The USCIRF recently visited and reported on religious freedom in Belarus and Russia, and has recommended that the State Department designate Turkmenistan a "country of particular concern (CPC)."

One issue of concern to the USCIRF regarding several OSCE member states is legislation that establishes overly restrictive criteria for official registration or recognition of religious groups. The Commission will meet privately with several experts and NGO representatives who are very active on this issue.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

- Felice D. Gaer ,
- Dean Michael K. Young ,